DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 545 CS 216 025

AUTHOR Reigstad, Tom
TITLE I Search, You Search, We All Search for I-Search: Research Alternative Works for Advanced Writers, Too.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Composition Chronicle: Newsletter for Writing Teachers; v10 n7 p4-7 Nov 1997
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; Learning Strategies; *Research Papers (Students); Teaching Methods; Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *I Search; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

Offering advanced writers the opportunity to present their research findings in the form of an I-Search paper yields a more enriching experience for them and a better "read" for their audience. In the past 2 years, students in upper-level undergraduate courses--like Advanced Composition and Teaching and Evaluating Writing and graduate courses such as The Teaching of Writing and a seminar on Mark Twain--have been encouraged to explore a personal area of interest in-depth and produce a major semester-long writing project known as an I-Search paper. Unlike a typical research paper which focuses mostly on reporting just the results of research from an analytical, objective narrative point-of-view, the I-Search paper requires students to carefully consider and document their research and writing processes as well as their ultimate findings and to tell the story of the entire search--including the results--in a personal, first-person voice. While research paper traditionalists might be persuaded that "the story of the search" plays a role in reporting, they would expect to see evidence of research. The I-Search paper does not disappoint. More often than not, the closing section of I-Search papers tell eloquently and revealingly of the writer's findings. (Contains three figures and four references.) (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
W. McCreary
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 412 545

I Search, You Search, We All Search for I-Search: Research Alternative Works for Advanced Writers, Too

Tom Reigstad

I first became interested in Mark Twain's ties to the occult when the topic came up in conversation during the February 24th class meeting. Based on my readings of Tom Sawyer, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, I already knew that Twain liked to make fun of superstitions related to witchcraft, ghosts, and other supernatural events in his writings. I assumed this was just a literary technique he used to play upon the many superstitions that were prevalent during his time period. I never thought he had any sort of personal interest in the paranormal activities/events that he included in his works of fiction.

That February evening, however, we discussed Twain's fascination with the occult and the possibility that the living could have contact with spirits of the deceased through dreams. At this point I began wondering just how far Twain's interest in spiritualism went ... (Melissa)

Eleanor Roosevelt said, "When you are genuinely interested in one thing, it will always lead to something else." This was the case with me and Nancie Atwell. A name synonymous with the writing workshop scenario, her ideals have become a common buzz word throughout my five years of teaching. Little did I know what an impact Nancie Atwell would have on my life.

... After completing In the Middle, I went to my principal and told him I wanted to go strictly "writing-reading workshop" for the 1996-97 school year.

... Soon, a new idea dawned on me. Due to class discussion and sharing of ideas in a writing course that I am currenily taking, the idea that Nancie Atwell was a former English teacher at my school sparked my interest. Suddenly, my curiosity over the early Atwell years caught my attention ... (Wynnie)

So begin the I-Search papers of two graduate students who were enrolled in separate courses that I recently taught. The introductory passages by both Melissa and Wynnie illustrate dramatic prose stylistic departures from the traditional, objective, expository type of scholarly paper that is commonly demanded of upper-level undergraduate and graduate student writers. I have found that offering advanced writers the opportunity to present their research findings in the form of an I-Search paper yields a more enriching experience for them and a better read for their audience.

In the last two years I have encouraged students in upper-level undergraduate courses like Advanced Composition and Teaching and Evaluating Writing, and graduate courses such as The Teaching of Writing and a seminar on Mark Twain to explore a personal area of interest in-depth and produce a major semester-long writing project known as an I-Search paper. Unlike a typical research paper, which focuses mostly on reporting just the results of research from an analytical, objective narrative point-of-view, the I-Search paper requires students to carefully consider and document their research and writing processes as well as their ultimate findings and to tell the story of their entire search—including the results—in a personal, first-person voice.

The I-Search paper is not a new concept. Ken Macrorie first described his alternative research/writing technique in *The New York Times* in 1979 and a year later in his book, *Searching Writing* (Hayden Book Company) which was later reprinted by Boynton/Cook as *The I-Search Paper* in 1984 and 1988 editions. It has been used extensively as a means for high school writers and college freshmen to dig into and enjoy a topic that captivates them. But as we climb the ladder of higher education, we seldom find the I-Search paper endorsed as a legitimate scholarly enterprise.

However, as the opening segments written by Melissa and Wynnie demonstrate, I-Search papers allow more latitude for writers than do conventional, standard research papers. First, they ask writers to relate the tale of their search for information, rather than simply discussing the information itself. Second, they ask writers to use a reader-friendly narrative viewpoint, namely the first-person. Third, they force writers to reflect on the complex twists and turns that they took as data collectors. In short, I-Search paper writers discover as much about the research process as they do about the subject matter they are investigating.

At a time when the discipline of composition studies is re-examining and debating the role of personal essays in writing courses, I am making a strong pitch for the subjective I-Search paper. Its personal touch is just the ticket, I think, for advanced writers who are accustomed to the formulaic, traditional "scholarly" research paper. In fact, they find the I-Search paper to be liberating and exhilarating. Furthermore, they find that it is more taxing than the conventional research paper and incredibly more enjoyable to write. But, from a teacher's point of view, it takes some preparation to nudge advanced writers to feel comfortable with "breaking out," as Macrorie would say.

Early in the course, I acquaint students with the basics of I-Search paper writing by sharing with them information from chapter six of Macrorie's *The I-Search Paper*. In that chapter, Macrorie provides a useful overview of the I-Search paper and what makes it unique. He lists eight suggestions for undertaking research (including interviewing experts as well as consulting second-hand sources) and recommends a four-part structure for presenting information: what I knew before writing on the topic; why I am

CS216025

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

writing the paper; the story of the search; and what I learned (62-64). For many writers, the I-Search format—particularly talking to authorities first-hand—will seem unorthodox. It's safer and easier to quote from a journal article!

I also keep a folder on hand of sample I-Search papers produced by previous students of mine, so that current writers may browse through the folder and get a feel for the I-Search paper style. They find, for example, how one of my former students got a wealth of information for an I-Search paper on school literary magazines by talking to the traffic coordinator of *Merlyn's Pen* over the phone.

Figure 1

I-SEARCH/I-CHART

Name: **I-Search Topic:**

What I already know:

Places searched so far: **Information gathered so far:**

Interesting related facts:

Key words:

What's next in my search:

By the end of the first month of the course, my students complete a set of brainstorming activities that help them narrow down their I-Search paper topic. First, I poll each student to find what "itch" (another Macrorie term) needs scratching. This status report usually takes place at least twice before students are committed to a researchable (I-searchable) subject. And by hearing what their colleagues are working on, they sometimes change their own minds before settling on the most interesting topic for them. Next, I ask students—about four weeks into the course—to do some preliminary plotting out of what they know and don't know, what sources they have looked into, and what sources they plan to consult. This prewriting stage forces students to take notes and plan their search in a way that seems more fruitful and disciplined than the time-honored 3x5 card note technique. I modified the inquiry chart (I-Chart) device described by Sally Randall (1996) to create an "I-Search/I-Chart" (Figure 1) for my students.

Soon after my students decide on their topic and begin their search, I share a list of ingredients that I will be looking for when I assess their final paper. Because the nature of the I-Search paper strikes some writers as a bit off-beat at first, embraces a wide range of sources of information, and elicits a story-telling style of reporting, I think it is important for students to know beforehand what my response criteria (Figure 2) will be.

At midterm, I ask writers to bring in a working draft—a substantial, but unfinished, chunk—of their I-Search paper for peer review. They meet in small groups and exchange manuscripts. At first I recommended talking points that respondents could focus on in giving feedback to the I-Search paper-in-progress. But I soon found that much of the productive conversation was lost and not reflected in the writer's revision. Currently, I ask peer respondents to write down their feedback by reacting to six prompts that I provide on an "I-Search Paper Response Form" (Figure 3). The peer review sessions often generate three sets of written responses, representing three perspectives, that writers can reflect on later as they revisit their I-Search drafts. Then, two or three weeks later, presumably after writers have done more work on their papers, I collect their revisions and use the same response form to give them my written feedback. Finally, at any point in the process, writers may confer with me one-on-one about their I-Search paper drafts.

Perhaps the primary feature of I-Search papers is that they invite writers to articulate fascinating insights about the journey of their search for information. Writers often tell the blow-by-blow account of their search in terms of an exciting detective hunt, describing surprises as well as deadends, delivered in a vivid, engaging prose style:

Twain changed his attitude regarding mediums after his contact with a medium named James Vincent Mansfield in 1879. Mansfield claimed he had contacted the spirit of Mark Twain's late brother Henry ... Unfortunately, the 'spirit' Mansfield contacted could not even remember the date of his own death ... Although Twain disguised its personal nature, he recalled this actual seance in a story about a fraudulent medium named Manchester in Life on the Mississippi (1883). The account is also mentioned in his notebook dated 1879.

This bad experience did not deter Twain from participating in paranormal experiences, though. Between 1900 and 1901, Mark

Twain and his wife Olivia had several spiritualists aid them in trying to establish mind contact with their deceased daughter Susy.

I now knew that Twain had used the help of spiritualists to try to contact his daughter Susy. However, the guidance of The Mark Twain Encyclopedia had not only led me to discover this information, it also piqued my interest regarding Twain's opinions of mental telepathy, hypnotism, phrenology, and palmistry. In order to find out more about Twain's use of these disciplines, I began poring over another work that was suggested by The Encyclopedia: The Haunted Dusk—American Supernatural Fiction, 1820-1920. (Melissa)

Figure 2

I-Search Paper Criteria

Before you get too far into writing your I-Search paper, I want to clarify the criteria on which your work will be evaluated:

1. Paper is written in three sections
   a. What I Know, Assume, or Imagine (prior to the search)
   b. The Search (testing knowledge, assumptions, or conjecture through docmented research)
   c. What I Discovered (comparing what you thought you knew with what you learned and offering commentary and conclusions)
2. Topic lends itself to investigation and discovery
3. Paper displays evidence of critical thinking and offers special insights into the topic discussed
4. Main points of the paper are well supported with examples
5. Writer uses transitons between ideas, paragraphs, and sections
6. Writer uses sentence variety
7. Writer uses precise, apt, or descriptive language
8. Writer uses effectively the conventions of written English
9. The Search segment of the paper is properly documented:
   a. Paper includes references to a variety of sources (print, non-print, interviews)
   b. Paper includes a "Works Cited" section at end
10. Writer uses research effectively as a supplement to, but not a substitute for, his or her own ideas
11. Paper conveys a strong sense of the writer's voice, through a first-person, story-telling, narrative
12. Writer takes an active rather than a passive role in the search
13. Paper is a genuine learning experience for the writer and the reader

I went to see Nancie Atwell speak at Canisius College in January, 1996. At the end of the engagement, I asked Nancie to sign my copy of In the Middle ... She asked me where I teach and I said "Tonawanda Junior High." Nancie responded "That's where I started." ... I began my teaching career where Nancie Atwell began hers. ..

Suddenly, about two weeks ago, I experienced yet another of life's revelations. Why not do my Master's Project on "The Legacy of Nancie Atwell at Tonawanda Junior High School." ...

Nancie Atwell graduated from Buffalo State College and was assigned to do her student teaching locally. Through Dr. Reigstad I received the name of one of her cooperating teachers ...

My next step in searching Atwell's early years was to question my colleagues at Tonawanda ... (Wynnie)

While research paper traditionalists might be persuaded that the "story of the search" plays a role in the reporting, they would expect to also see evidence of research. The I-Search paper does not disappoint. More often than not, the closing section of I-Search papers tell eloquently and revealingly of the writer's findings. Writers not only describe what they learned and how they learned it, but they take the time to reflect on the process, evaluate it, and speculate on future possibilities—all in a persona that is personable and authoritative:

At the end of my search, I looked back to where I started and realized that the sources I had intended on using as my primary research tools had not been as useful as I had anticipated. I did review Justin Kaplan's Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain and Hamlin Hill's God's Fool, but they seemed to just skim the surface of Twain's true involvement in spiritualism. Two works which I had never heard of prior to beginning my search, Mediums, and Spirit Rappers, and Roaring Radicals and The Haunted Dusk had provided me with invaluable information regarding my topic.

During the course of my research, the topic itself broadened as well. I intended on simply doing research about Mark Twain's attempts to contact the dead. I ended up learning about his participation in many seances throughout his lifetime, his use of phrenology, palmistry, and fortune tellers, his beliefs regarding mental telepathy and the power of dreams, and also his use of hypnotists to try to cure his daughter Jean of her seizure disorder. At one point or another Twain either ridiculed or praised every occult fad that flourished in his lifetime. One thing is for certain—in one way or another Twain experimented with and in some cases tried to debunk the occult arts during every decade of his adult life. (Melissa)

Well, I guess my search all boils down to one person—Nancie Atwell herself ... There are a few other people yet to contact to get all the pieces together for the puzzle. However, I don't mind. This project is a real challenge—and a very interesting one. In regard to the writing program that Nancie and her colleagues set up at Tonawanda Junior High School and outlined in the November 1976 English Journal, there are remnants still, but it needs to be revamped. All this will take time, but at least the ball started rolling twenty years ago. As with writing, curriculum development follows a process. I'm not sure where this search will end up taking me, but I sure am enjoying what I am learning along the way! (Wynnie)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

My advanced writers have produced I-Search papers on topics as diverse as the importance of journal writing in the classroom, multiple intelligences, grammar when we write, prejudice in the works of Mark Twain, and searching for the ultimate way to assess the research paper. One graduate student in my Teaching Writing course even cleverly entitled her I-Search paper: "I-Searching the I-Search Paper." She employed her training as an undergraduate classics minor to undertake a journey to probe the I-Search paper technique. Occasionally her narration playfully echoes Homer: "My faithful Penelope, this is the story of my quest, not to learn what the I-Search paper is, but to experience what the I-Search paper becomes." Toward that end, she surveyed her classmates for anecdotes about their I-Search paper composing processes and attitudes.

Figure 3

I-SEARCH PAPER RESPONSE FORM

WRITER: _____
READER: _____

1. To me, the main point of the story being told is that:

2. The part or quality of the I-Search paper I like best is:

3. Overall, I get/don't get a clear sense of each of these elements: (a) what the writer didn't know about the topic when starting out; (2) why the topic is important enough to write about; (c) the story of the writer's search for information; (d) what the writer learned or didn't learn:

4. A place where I feel lost or confused is:

5. The sentence that surprises me most is:

6. I really wanted to know more about:

There are additional resources that I find helpful in teaching the I-Search paper to experienced writers. Boynton/Cook Publishers sells a videotape, "Searching Writing: Making Knowledge Personal" (1985), in which Ken Macrorie walks a group of writers through the stages of creating an I-Search paper. And the Internet, particularly a web site sponsored by the Education Development Center, Inc., of Newton, MA, is rich with I-Search teaching tips.

I believe that the I-Search paper promotes student collaboration (suggesting sources to each other, giving feedback on evolving papers), opens doors to writers to seek a variety of perspectives on their subject, nurtures a natural writing voice, and hooks process and product together in a challenging, scholarly marriage. Student testimony on course evaluations confirms my hunches. Even a graduate Twain student who was at first reluctant to "break out" from the traditional lit-crit format ended the course with a guardedly favorable comment on the potential of the I-Search paper: "I must say, it was an interesting change of pace to conclude my M.A. program with this type of writing assignment." Other students have been much more enthusiastic:

"The I-Search paper was a great way of pursuing a topic of interest in a unique and informal way."

"I enjoyed the I-Search paper and think I'll probably use it in teaching. I learned a lot through doing it, more than if I had done a standard research paper, and it was enjoyable, not a 'task,' like the research paper usually seems."

"I was interested in the others' topics for the I-Search paper."

And Wynnie? Last January (seven months after completing her I-Search paper for my course) I received a note from her asking me for a letter of recommendation to teach abroad in the summer. She added this post script: "By the way—off the subject—I attended the New York State English Council Conference in Albany last October and got to 'interview' Nancie Atwell. I'll keep you posted on my project."

Her energetic search continues. I can't wait to read her master's thesis.

References:

Fisher, Wynnie (1996). "The Search for Nancie Atwell." Unpublished manuscript. Buffalo State College.

Macrorie, Ken (1988). *The I-Search Paper* (Boynton/Cook Publishers: Portsmouth, NH).

Randall, Sally (1996). "Information Charts: A Strategy for Organizing Student Research," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 39:7, 536-542.

Wadsworth-Miller, Melissa (1997). "Mark Twain and the Occult." Unpublished manuscript. Buffalo State College.

Tom Reigstad is a professor of English at Buffalo State College.